

RITUAL IN KANNADA FOLK THEATRE

Chandrasekhar Kambar

Kannada folk drama has taken its form from religious ritual. The most important aspect of such ritual is imitation of the Divine and his sport or *ata*. Kannada folk drama opens with an invocation and closes with *mangala*, the release. The intervening chain of action and sentiment becomes the concretisation of the Divine sport in the context of this world.

Here I wish to explore through Kannada examples—the *Dasarata* and the *Sannata*—the way ritual is dramatised and drama is ritualised, as also with the professional troupes (*Dasas*) and one type of folkplay (*Sannata*) and its presentation on the stage.

Most villages have their local deities with non-Brahmin professional priests who offer worship daily. On a particular day of every week special worship is offered by the devotees who are called *Alumakkalu*, or sons and servants of the deity. At about 9 at night, the devotees gather in the *verandah* of the temple. They spread a holy mat, *Devara gambali*. Four of them sit on the mat, each occupying a corner facing the deity. Two of them hold big cymbals. And a fifth, with a drum, sits in the middle, while the rest of the devotees sit around. Now all the devotees together sing twice to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals: "Behold our Lord comes, Welcome." Then the front two of the four sitting on the mat begin to sing the glories of the deity with the other two repeating each line after them. At the end of every song they again shout: "Here we complete a chapter and, pray, listen to us if we sing further." Very brief *pujas* are performed at the very start and towards the end of the singing by the man holding the drum. If the leading singers are in a proper mood within no time they dramatise the songs, dancing around the drum with appropriate gestures imagining themselves to be the deity. This is known as *Haduseva*, 'serving the deity through song'. Most of

the current local deities have such weekly or monthly ceremonies. The hearing of such songs is also considered to be a kind of worship, *seva*.

Deities possess two elements, namely *Devva*, the evil spirit, and *Deva*, the superior power, which is capable of controlling the former. The evil spirits attract more attention, for it is fear of them which calls forth the ceremonies of propitiation. Several festival ceremonies are celebrated on fixed occasions in honour of the spirit who is the presiding deity over the destiny of a villager. The most important part of such ceremonies is to sing its prayers and dance for its glory in front of either the deity or a man who represents the deity, being possessed by it. This representation is called *Devarata*, God's sport, in which we see the seed of folk-drama. These deities are called the Seven Sisters.

The worship of the Seven Sisters is most prominent among the primitive Kannada-speaking people. Though the names of the deities vary from place to place, their qualities, powers and festival rituals are the same. They are referred to as *Uradevaru*, or *Gramadevaru*—village deities—in government records. Their temples are crude and built with stone and mud. They are invariably connected with diseases and are responsible for all kinds of evils that befall the village. If proper worship is not offered they are supposed to take retribution and cause diseases such as smallpox, cholera or cattle-sickness. If a disease appears to be epidemic, the villagers gather and arrange a *jatra*, or festival. The announcement of the coming festival is made by a *sudra* called *Asadi* or storyteller, who on the first day of the announcement tells the story of the deity, describing her powers and the dangers which may befall from neglecting her.

During the *jatra* festival which occupies three to seven days it is the *Asadi* who plays a very important role and not the Brahmin priest or high caste priests who worship the deity on all other days. The whole festival takes place under the *Asadi*'s leadership. He summons the elders to witness the festival, leads the procession and collects food from the villagers. On the last day he wears a *sari* as women do and mounts the temple cart along with the image of the deity. The procession goes around the main streets and comes back to the temple. Then a buffalo is sacrificed. The *Asadi* then drinks the buffalo's blood and holds a snake-hooded sceptre. Immediately, he begins to tremble in a particular way to show that he is possessed by the deity. Soon he is accompanied by two more *Asadis* with drum and cymbals. They begin to sing the glory of the deity. The priest *Asadi* sings every first word of the line of the song, while the other two complete the line. While they sing, he dances around the deity. At the end there is a strange custom of reviling the high caste people, especially Brahmins. The high caste people not only accept this, but demand it. If the *sudra Asadis* hesitate, they are compelled, sometimes beaten with ropes

and sticks to perform their duty. He then foretells future incidents that many occur in the village, promises to keep away disease and to make the crops and children prosper. After this he puts down the royal staff, which means he is no more possessed by the deity.

Aside from its importance as a religious ritual, the above sequence embodies six fundamental elements of Kannada folk-drama.

- 1 Prelude: the ritual involving the deity;
- 2 make-up: the priest disguises himself as the deity;
- 3 chorus and music: two singers with drum and cymbals accompanying the priest-actor's dance;
- 4 dance: which is the spiritual and physical re-enactment of what they sing;
- 5 theme: the story of the deity sung by priest and chorus;
- 6 *mangala*: the release of the possessing deity and the close of the 'play'.

By their choral singing, the beat of the drum, and the impersonator's dance, the "actors" initiate their devotee-cum-spectators into an experience of *Bhakti*, devotion, which is the basic function of folk-theatre.

There are also dramatic dances like *Parvanthara Kunita* (dance of *pramathas* or *saints*), *Jogera Kunita* (dance of *yogins*), and *Biradevara Kunita* (dance of god *Bira*) which have clearcut plots, dances in varying rhythms, symbolic gestures, and music in chorus. Especially in *Parvantara Kunita* five persons carrying earthen pots containing live coal will go in a procession and the *parvantas* (*saints*) keep dancing in front of them. A *parvanta* who is supposed to be possessed by God Virabhadra shouts and sings his praise. His followers join him repeating his lines, dancing vigorously to the accompaniment of a double drum and *sambala*, and cymbals. There is also a jester, who provides a good deal of humour with his funny riddles and actions. All these rituals performed without any aid of Brahmins are considered to be originally Dravidian by many scholars.

Such rituals are innumerable but their basic structure is the same. The above hints suggest that these rituals are the source and model of folk theatre. If analysed carefully, songs which are an integral part of the rituals contain stories of the deities and the enactment of these stories makes the drama.

Professional Castes

There are castes which specialise in professional storytelling, with family names like *Dasa* (servants of Visnu), *Killiketa* (who entertain low caste villagers by telling stories) *Puranika*, *Kirtanakam* (who tells stories from *Puranas*), *Gamaki* (who interprets the epics), *Gorava* (professional bard), *Gondaliga* (who sings the stories of Tulaja or Sita), *Jogi* (devotional dancer of

Yellamma), *Kategara* (storyteller) *Balasanta* (who amuses children by his stories), *Hasyagara* (jester), *Nattuva* (actor), *Nakali* (humourist) and *Bahurupi* (mimic). Their stories are invariably in the form of ballads. While telling them they use stylised language, often impersonating their heroes for the entertainment of the rural audience. They are devotees of different gods and their storytelling also has different religious functions. Though the emphasis is gradually shifted from dance to the spoken word, the basic structure of the storytelling is still maintained: i.e., a, invocation, b, the story, c, blessing to the audience.

Dasarata

The *Dasas* are servants of temples whose profession is to enact religious plays before the village public. On festive occasions they travel from village to village and give performances wherever they receive sufficient patronage. A group of such *Dasas* is called a *Mela* or *Dasaratada Mela* (a *dasa* group of players). They are devotees of Tirupati Timmappa, or of a nearby village Hanuman. The leader of the group is called *Nattuvan*, an actor under whose guidance all the *dasas* of the group are trained, and it is he who is commissioned and is held responsible for the performance. He is the son of a talented *Dasa* or *Dasi* and commands respect from all other actors as does a priest from devotees. He is as serious about his art as is an orthodox priest about his worship. A special feature of this *Dasamela* is that both men and women participate in the drama. Every *mela* has at least one leading lady who is highly talented in singing and dancing and the success or popularity of the performance greatly depends on her.

Any open house, village square, street, or a *mandapa* can be their stage. A carpet, ten-foot square, is spread on the ground. In the middle a blanket is hung which divides the stage. The back of the hanging cloth is their dressing room, which they call *Olatta*—the inner stage. The front is the actual stage. The stage is open, surrounded by the audience on all three sides. The audience is called *Parasi*—a group of devotees gathered to celebrate a festival. In *Olatta* they light a big earthen oil lamp which is the symbol of Tirupati Timmappa, their family god. Incense, fruits, a coconut, ankle bells and the cymbals of the *Nattuvan* are kept before the lamp. As soon as all the actors are ready with their make-up and costumes the *Nattuvan* and the *Dasi*, the leading lady, stand before the lamp with folded hands; behind them all the other actors and instrumentalists form a row in the same way. The *Nattuvan* first worships the lamp, offering fruits and flowers, breaks a coconut and throws the pieces on either side of the stage, bows to the lamp and takes up his cymbals. This is followed by an invocation called *Avana* (*Avahana*), 'invoking the god'. No musical instrument is played at this time, except the *Nattuvan's* cymbals. Then the *Dasi* bows to the lamp and touches the feet of the *Nattuvan* and ties her ankle bells. Actors and instrumentalists follow her, touch the

Nattuvan's feet and touch her feet also. The *Nattuvan* steps onto the stage, salutes the audience and stands in the middle. On his left is a man seated with a harmonium, and on the right is a man standing with a *daf*—a drum-like instrument. The *Nattuvan* holds the cymbals. Next to the hanging cloth in *Olatta*, there are again three singers with small metal cymbals. Actors writing for their appearance sit here and there in the *Olatta*.

The performance starts at about 10 in the evening with songs in praise of Gods Timmappa, Siva, Ganesa to the accompaniment of instruments. While singing the invocation songs the *Nattuvan* stands with his back to the audience.

The next preliminary is the appearance of Radha played by the *Dasi*. She enters with rhythmic steps singing in the third person "Behold, Radha comes jingling her bells" etc. The *Nattuvan* singing with every character forms *Mummela*, the front chorus, and the three other persons in *Olatta* repeating every line form *Himmela*, the back chorus. While the *Himmela* sings, one of them in a shrill voice repeating the lines, the character interprets the song in dance with vivid gestures to heighten the emotion. Then she stands in a corner. The *Nattuvan* goes to her and asks:

Nattuvan: "Lady, tell us who you are. Why did you come?"

Lady: "Who are you to ask me?"

Nattuvan: "They call me the *Nattuvan* or *Melagara*."

Lady: "*Melagara*, you want to know my name?"

Nattuvan: "Yes, the audience and I want to know your name."

Lady: "Then listen to me."

Accompanied by *Melagara* she sings a song after which she tells the summary of the song in a dialogue adding a few more details: her name is Radha, she sells milk and butter, her husband's village is Gokula, her parents live in the village—always the village where they are performing. She also begs the *Melagara* to tell her where her milk can be sold soon, in the Brahmin street or in Ksatriya street, etc. While she is about to go to sell her milk, Krishna comes and stops her, asking her to pay the toll. Again *Melagara* introduces him to the audience in the same way. Then Krishna says to the *Melagara*:

Krishna: "My servant, ask her to pay the toll, her milk."

Melagara: (goes to her) "Krishna says you have to pay him the toll; your milk."

Radha: "Did he say so? Then listen to me."

She again sings and says, "Tell him it is not proper behaviour for a gentleman to ask a married woman for milk. Even my husband cannot get it." *Melagara* goes to Krishna and repeats the same thing.

Krishna: "Is that so? I myself will ask her. Come to this side."

Melagara goes to his original place. Krishna and Radha addressing each other directly quarrel for a while supporting their stand. Then Radha agrees to give her milk—her virginity—to Krishna; both dance together and go off.

The above preliminary is followed by one or two stories based on Krishna's incarnations. If the audience likes it, these stories of incarnations continue. Otherwise they move around the theme of love. The leading lady, now her name is Chimnabai, greatly welcomed by the chorus, enters in traditional costumes as the heroine. The hero, Goddi Bhimanna, expresses his love which she rejects promptly. They begin to debate about Siva and Sakti; Krishna and Radha, each of them claiming his or her supremacy over the other. Songs from famous saints and poets are quoted to support their stand. There is also a jester providing fun by his ridiculous clothes which he changes frequently. He tells bombastic lies, gives funny twists or vulgar touches to their arguments. The performance lasts until six in the morning, sometimes the hero or the heroine establishing victory over the other, sometimes neither giving in to the other. The audience may urge Chimnabai to sing their favourite songs which may not even be connected with the story. Or sometimes they may also ask the *Melagara* to play their favourite stories of Krishna's incarnations. All these stories are different from each other and each lasts for an hour or two. They are altogether separate ballads mostly sung with one or two stageable dramatic scenes. Each one has its own invocation songs.

In spite of its lacking a regular theme and framework this form "became so popular providing a wealth of entertainment, information and humour, that when teams of *Dasarata* performers visited Maharashtra, it seems to have been readily accepted and adopted by the Marathi Stage. As a result similar performances with the same characters and characteristics came up in Maharashtra under the name *Tamasha*.

When in full swing, *Tamasha* became such a popular and powerful theatrical mode, that it assumed the role of the most-successful medium of political and cultural propaganda in Maharashtra."²

Melagara, the Sutradhar

Besides its impact on other folkforms it is important to note how a crude folk-theatre took its form from rituals. Like the *Asadi* of the village deity, in *Dasarata* there is the *Melagara*. He invokes God, sings the story accompanied by all the characters. He is also called *Nattuvan*, *Metitala*, the principal cymbal-holder, *Kathegara*, the story teller. His cymbals are never touched by any other member of the chorus. When all the actors are ready for the show with their make-up and costumes he offers worship to the lamp and salutes the cymbals and then holds them. He does this again when

the performance ends and he puts the cymbals down. Every *Melagara* believes that his cymbals were directly given by Tirupati Timmappa to his ancestors. The best way to serve God is to keep the tradition alive, the rejection of which may bring disaster to his family. throughout the performance he never leaves the stage. The Invocation and the *Mangala* have to be performed only by him. He introduces every character to the audience. He links events, narrating what has happened before the commencement. He questions the characters, asks for explanations, makes them repeat their lines and sings for them but never dances with them. Minor roles like servant, messenger, bystander, and maid servant etc. are played by him. He does not use any make-up and costumes. He narrates the story either singing alone or with characters and hence his name is *Kathagara*, the story teller. As he controls the time-beat (*tala*) of every song he is called *Metitala*, the main cymbalist (*meti*: the central pole of the threshing floor). He leads the group of players teaching them, encouraging them, paying them; he also manages the stage—so he is called *Melagara*, the leader of the group of actors.

The chorus is divided into two groups. The purpose of the two extra *Asadis* in *jatra* is served by the back chorus. They are three in number, standing next to the hanging cloth in *Olatta* and are not seen by the audience. They repeat every line of the front-chorus, as the characters interpret the song in dance.

A strange custom of offering girls to the temple is observed in some *Dasa* families. There are two divisions among the *Dasas* namely Left-hand *dasas* (*Edagai Dasaru*) and Right-hand *dasas* (*Balagai Dasaru*). Only Left-hand *dasas* offer their daughters to the temple. Such girls are called *devadasis* or *dasis* (Maid servants of God). A girl brought up to be a *Dasi* is taught dancing and singing from her childhood. When she is thirteen years old a "wedding ceremony" is arranged. On an auspicious day they go in a procession to a nearby Hanuman temple singing, beating the drum and clanging cymbals. A blanket decorated with coloured rice is spread facing the god. On that blanket there is a drum on the right and the girl sits on the left. The *Nattuvan* who has taught her dancing and music and whose *Mela* she is to join acts as a priest. He chants brief *mantrams* in Sanskrit and garlands the girl. In return the girl puts a garland on the drum, *talibottu*, a wedding pendant is tied round her neck; anklebells are offered by the *Nattuvan*, while the rest of the caste throws rice on the girl and the drum. The wedding ends with a feast given by her parents.

Then she lives by prostitution. If she begets children, her daughters will become *dasis* and her sons will live by playing music, by teaching dancing and singing to young girls and boys. They are the *Nattuvans*.

The jester is called *Jawari*, the rough or thick skinned. He neither sings nor dances. Every now and then he changes his

clothes, makes fun of Brahmin widows and village chiefs by mimicking them. He often gives a vulgar twist to the conversation of the characters. He is really the concrete form of the reviling element of the village deity festivals.

Thematic Elements

It would not be improper to discuss in brief some thematic elements of *Dasarata* here. In the preliminaries of every *Dasarata* a Gopi or Radha and Krishna make their appearance. In North India there are three forms of *Rasalila* dances, one of them being *Danalila* in which Krishna teases the Gopis and makes them pay the toll of milk, their virginity. We find "the oldest clear reference to the pastoral Krishna . . . in the early Tamil where the 'Black one' (*Mayon*) plays his flute and sports with milkmaids."³ We hardly find references to Radha Krishna cult in *Bhakti Sastra* of the South. There are Alwars who worshipped Krishna adopting the *Nayika Nayaka* (beloved and lover) type of *Bhakti*. In *Bhagavat-Purana* the concept of *Maharasa* is described in detail. There might be some folk dances based on the sports of Krishna with Gopis. In spite of its folk elements, today's Radha Krishna dance has many resemblances to the *Rasalila* of North India. Perhaps the Vaisnava movement led by Chaitanya was responsible for the introduction of this *Rasa* in North Karnataka where it has been a living tradition in *Dasarata* ever since.

Another noteworthy point is regarding the *Sakti* cult. There are two schools in both Siva or Krishna faith, namely *Kalagi* and *Tura*. The *Tura* believes in Krishna, or Siva, as the supreme god. Therefore its followers emphasise Krishna or Siva in their worship. The *Kalagi* claims *Sakti* (the female energy) as the supreme. Therefore the followers emphasise Radha or Parvati in their worship. We find in sculpture male deities conceived as inseparably associated with their *Saktis* and the two are worshipped together in specially made icons like those of Lakshmi-Narayana, Lakshmi-Narsimha, Radha-Krishna, Ardhanarisvara (the hermaphrodite form of Siva), of which we get an early example in the Dharmaraja *Ratha* at Mamallapuram (7th-8th century A.D.) and so on. *Ratha* at Mamallapuram 7th-8th century A.D.) and so on. These composite images and the combined worship offered to them may also be regarded as indicating an effort to bring closer together *Saktism* (worship of the female principle) and the more ordinary form of worship of male deities.⁴ *Prabhulingalile*, a Kannada literary work of the 15th century, clearly shows how people of the time were excited by the cult.

But the fundamental theme of *Dasarata* is *Dasavatara* or ten incarnations of Visnu and not the *Sakti* cult. Each of the ten incarnations is sung in a separate ballad composed by different poets. It is possible to trace their history from the 9th century A.D. when Nayanars and Alvars initiated a new type of *Bhakti*, 'a fervid emotional surrender to God' which found in due course its

supreme literary expression in the *Bhagavata Purana* (tenth century), a *Bhakti* very different from the calm dignified devotion of the *Bhagavatas* of the early centuries before and after Christ in North India. Parties of devotees under the leadership of one gifted saint or another traversed the country many times over, singing, dancing, and debating all the way."⁵ Chowdayya, a *Saiva Dasa* of the 12th century, who was a contemporary of Saint Allamaprabhu says in one of his *Vachanas* how he took on the roles of the great Saints, Allama, Basava, Ajaganna and others. We also learn that competitions were held between two *Dasas* of different faiths, the condition of which was that the defeated party should give up his creed and adopt that of the visitor. Chaudayya was one such *Saiva Dasa* who defeated Acyuta, a *Vaisnava Dasa*, who used to perform religious plays based on the ten incarnations of Visnu.

Today we do not find any reference to *Saiva Dasa* except in the names of some families who might have given up their profession. But there are a few *Vaisnava Dasas* who are true to their family name and tradition.

Dasarata as we find today suffers from the lack of a definite theme that can last for hours. Except a few stories of incarnations, the rest of the performance is a thing of shreds and patches. It may be a debate on the *Sakti* cult, or a social farce. The *dasi* is ever ready to sing the favourite songs of the audience. It is interesting to see how the *Sannata*, 'the small play', which is the offspring of *Dasarata* took its unique shape out of these unconnected elements of *Dasarata*.

The "Small" Play

Sannata: the small play, is so called to distinguish it from another type called *Dodddata*—the long play. It is an improvised form of *Dasarata* changed thematically but retaining its original technical flavor. It has a *Melagara* to lead the group, a divided chorus and instead of a small number of short unconnected stories it has a full length story that can last for about six hours. Such stories are innumerable. The dancing is very simple and does not require any particular talent. Because of its simplicity *Sannata* is so popular among the villagers that almost every village has its own troupe.

There are famous troupes specialising in certain plays; they are invited by far-off villages on festive occasions. The *Melagara* of a famous troupe may make vows to a famous deity nearby that he would give a performance yearly on certain auspicious occasions. In such cases he attends the festival without any invitation: The only responsibility of the temple authorities is to erect a stage for him and feed the group. Next day the priest blesses the *Melagara* with a coconut which is a way of inviting him for another performance the next year. In festivals celebrating famous deities, several such troupes put up their own open platforms and give

performances. If the performance is extraordinary, chiefs of other villages invite the troupe offering them a coconut. Before accepting the coconut, the *Melagara* lays down his terms of payment. Such troupes are paid three to four hundred rupees per performance.

Troupes also manage to get invited by individual patrons. The fees are small and the set-up required is elementary. Such occasions are the wedding of a son, the birth of a male child, family religious festivals. Some rural admirers or devotees invite them collectively. If such a performance is financed by several families jointly they perform at the crossroads, the market-place, or a village orchard.

Very few actors earn their living by giving frequent performances. They move about from village to village, from fair to fair. Fairs and festivals are held during the months following the rainy season or in the summer. During the rainy season as the farmer is busy, festivities and therefore folk dramas, are avoided. If it does not rain properly in the rainy season—then the troupes are invited.

The Stage

Folk theatre serves the same purpose as a temple, being associated with it. Savia and Vaisnava cults use folkdrama as a delightful instrument to popularise their creeds and to attract devotees. Consequently, temples have courtyards or open *verandahs* designed to enable troupes to set up a stage. The stage is called *Atta*—which means a raised platform. They also call it *Gaddigi*, the seat of god. A three foot raised platform, sixteen foot square is the stage, made of bamboo and wood with four poles at each corner. The canopy rests on poles. Tent cloth is used to cover the back as well as the canopy. The rest is open. The poles are decorated with green leaves and flowers. In the middle of the stage, facing the audience, a thick cloth is hung which divides the stage. The back of this cloth is called *Olatta*, the inner part of the stage, where the actors take rest and the chorus stands.

The Audience

The audience sit on all three sides. Men sit on one side, women on the other. Children are allowed to sleep anywhere they like. *Sudras*, male and female, together sit at the back from where the demons enter the stage. Plain ground is the normal seat for everybody although some spectators do bring their own carpets, so they can sleep when a scene bores them. If there is not enough room, the audience may occupy neighbouring housetops and shops. Special seating arrangements are made for the priest, the village chiefs and for the police if they happen to be there. Brahmins do not witness these plays. Neither the audience nor the actors feel their absence.

If the audience is excited by any song, dance, joke, or piece of acting, they feel free to express their appreciation quite loudly. They may shout 'Once more'. 'Shahabbas!' 'Vahavva!', etc. If they happen to have money they may go to the stage and give gifts to their favourite actor or actress. Or pour the coins or puffed rice on the dancer. Or they may honor him with garlands made of paper money, cookies or flowers. If they are not convinced by the behaviour of any character or by any incident of the story, they may stand up and question the actor or *Melagara*. Here also the audience is called *Parasi*—a group of devotees gathered to celebrate the festival of a deity.

The Green Room and Make-Up

The Green room is also called *chauki*, a special square seat. A house where the actors rehearse is used for putting on make-up and costumes. If the *mela* is from another village they are provided with a house near the stage. At 9 p.m. actors begin to get ready with their make-up and costumes, which is very simple. The heroine wears a bright-coloured *sari* drawn between the legs and tucked back with the legs free to dance. The tucked up end is visible, emphasising the hips and makes an effective design. She wears a necklace, earrings, a nose ring and ankle-bells. In Vaisnava and social plays, except the heroine, no actor be he Krishna or the hero, wears any costumes and make-up. Everyone is in his daily clothes which are exceptionally clean on that day. In Saiva plays, kings appear with a *kirita* (crown) or other appropriate headdress, *kavacha*, a tight vest, *challana*, tight trousers, a full-sleeved shirt, a *dhoti* worn in a style appropriate to the hero, which is called *viragacce*. A *sadhu* or a monk wears a long yellow loose shirt called *bhagava*; he has a beard, and holds in his hands, a *kamandala* (bowl) and a folded deer skin. Ghosts or spirits wear feathers and green leaves with their face coloured red, white and black. Special care is taken by all the village artists in the make-up of a ghost, which takes longer than for any other characters. If he is a dog, he wears a belt round his neck, and if a bear, a bearskin is worn. God Siva smears blue ashes on his body and holds a trident. Compared to the other types of plays, both make-up and costumes of *Sannata* are very simple.

Preliminaries

As soon as the actors are ready with their make up and costumes *Ganna*—the worship of Ganesa, a sacred ritual—follows. Images of the deities and musical instruments are placed in a corner of the *chauki*, the green room, before a burning earthen lamp. A handful of rice, two coconuts, flowers, betelnuts, a pair of cymbals and ankle-bells are placed before the lamp stand. The *Melagara* comes forward with all other members behind him. He offers worship, and holds his cymbals. The heroine bows to the

lamp, touches *Melagara's* feet and ties her ankle-bells. Others follow her. Instruments are turned to the voices of actors. Then all of them together sing in praise of the local deity, Ganesa, and Krishna or Siva. Musical instruments, harmonium and *tabla*, a pair of drums are brought on stage. At about 11 o'clock the *Melagara* with his cymbals and one of the coconuts leads the actors to the stage. Everyone bows to the stage before 'climbing' on to it. They call it *Atta Eru*—climbing on to the stage, which is supposed to be a holy act. In the right corner of the stage is the *tabla* player and in the left corner, the harmonium player. In the middle stands the *Melagara*. Next to the hanging cloth in *Olatta* stand a group of seven, the back chorus.

The drama opens with two or three invocation songs sung by the chorus. Then *Melagara* breaks a coconut and throws its pieces on both sides of the stage. Then he salutes and addresses the audience saying that whoever listens to his "story" will have god's grace and prosperity in life. This is followed by the prelude (*purvaranga*).

In this type of drama there are three varieties—Saiva, Vaisnava and social plays. The preliminaries are different for each variety. In Vaisnava plays Krishna and Radha appear as they do in *Dasarata*. In Saiva plays Siva and Parvati make their appearance, where in social plays no god appears, at least in the beginning. Actually here the seed of the story (*kathabija*) is mentioned; the rest of the action will be its result. Stories are in an opera-cum-ballad form composed in popular native tunes. *Melagara* sings along with every character. The character repeats the lines twice by going to both front corners of the stage. The back chorus joins them in singing *arakali* or the opening lines of the song at the end of each stanza. The actor punctuates his songs with dancing steps and while the back chorus is singing he shouts to the addressee. "Listen to me, I have something to tell", to which the concerned person says, "Yes, dear friend, proceed". At the end of every song, the name of the poet's god is mentioned and while singing it everyone on the stage folds his hands and salutes the imaginary deities. After that a short refrain is sung, while the actor performs three rounds of short dances called *chalti*. Cymbals, a harmonium and *tabla* are the accompanying instruments. During the *chalti* dances of the actor all instrumentalists play different rhythms at the same time, and all join together in unison at the final climax synchronising with the last round of dance by the actor. Then he interprets the song in dialogue with exaggerated gestures. He is given full freedom with his words. He may add details, make jokes, quote proverbs.

The Curtain

The curtain is used at the beginning as part of the preliminary rites and to introduce important characters by stimulating the

audience's curiosity. Two members of the audience hold a blanket or a *dhoti* so that the audience cannot see the arrival of the god or a character. Behind the curtain stand Krishna or Siva, king, queen or heroine. The chorus sings his or her praise with special music working up a high tempo after which the curtain is removed. The sudden appearance of a full dressed character excites the audience and builds up a climax of fantasy. Thus the curtain is used for the exciting introduction of the principal characters and as a part of the preliminary ritual of homage to the deity.

Entrance

All entries except those of spirits and killers are made from behind the stage, Olatta. Killers rush through the audience carrying weapons and torches in their hands. Spirits are brought in a procession from the *chauki*—the green room, accompanied by the two members of the chorus singing all the way while the spirit dances with wild shouts. Children and some members of the audience who want to shout join and help them carry torches. When the procession reaches the *sudra* audience, worship is offered, a coconut is broken, and songs in praise of the spirit are sung by the chorus on the stage.

Stage Properties

A chair is used as a piece of stage property which can represent many things: a wall between two houses, a door, a throne, a bench, a bed, as the scene requires. After its use an actor or a member of the chorus remove it. Most of the time characters keep moving from one corner to another, and it is only on certain occasions that stage property is used.

Recent Innovations

In the old days an oil torch called *Divatige*—the torch in the temple, was used. Its reddish dim light heightened the make-up and costumes, creating a mysterious atmosphere. Now the torch is replaced by petromax or more recently by electric lamps which shed a penetrating sharp light and expose the actors' artificial make-up and costumes. Nowadays even the *Dasas* wish to have bright light little realising how much it exposes them.

After the benediction songs in Vaisnava plays a curtain is raised by two members of the audience. Radha stands behind the curtain and special music evocative of her personality is played. The *Melagara* welcomes her, describing her dress, beauty, gait, etc. Radha also joins him though the song is in the third person. The audience gets an occasional glimpse of her face. At the end of the song, the music works up a higher tempo, which Radha accompanies, dancing rapidly. After this the curtain is removed and the audience gets a good look at Radha with a milkpot on her head. *Melagara* comes to her and asks:

Melagara: "Lady, who are you, disturbing the innocent boys of the village?"

Radha: "Tell me first, who you are?"

Melagara: "My name is Melagara. Some call me maid-servant, some messenger. Now tell me who you are, why did you come?"

Radha: "My maidservant, is it necessary to answer all these questions?"

Melagara: "Yes, otherwise how can the audience know who you are?"

Radha: "Then, maidservant, listen to me."

She sings a song that implies her answer. *Melagara* joins her. She sings every line twice, going once to each front corner of the stage. The chorus repeats the first few lines after each stanza, while *Radha* intervenes occasionally and utters the words "Oh maidservant, listen to me. I am answering your questions", to which the *Melagara* replies, "Yes, madam, go on." Exchanges of such formalities between two characters or between a character and the *Melagara* is a common feature. After the song is over, a brief dance interlude follows with the accompaniment of musical instruments. Then *Radha* summarises the song in stylised prose. She informs him that she is a milkmaid, her husband's village is Gokula, and she also requests him to tell her where to sell her milk. The rest of the prelude is the same as in *Dasarata*. But in the end *Radha* does not accept Krishna's invitation though he tries to win her with whole 'reels' of songs. *Radha* says: "In the next birth you become Galpoji and I will become Chimnabai. Try your luck again. If you succeed you are a good hunter, if not, a beggar." Saying this she rushes off.

Accordingly they both take birth in a village which is where the performance is now taking place. Chimna gets married to a man who belongs to another village. Before going to her husband's house, in her dreams she meets a strange man who snatches away her milkpot and drinks from it. Galpoji also meets a girl in his dreams with a milkpot on her head. One day by chance they see each other and fall in love. Chimna (*Radha*) says, "If the bull has the courage let it jump over the fence."

Galpoji: "If your parents see the bull they may take it to the manger."

Chimna: "Who knows, there may be a young cow waiting for him."

Accordingly they both meet in the manger. This does not last long. She is forced to go back to her husband's house.

Galpoji waits long for her to come back. In despair he sells his land and house and disappears as a *sadhu*. Chimna learns

about all these happenings from the maidservant i.e. the *Melagara*. Then ignoring her household, she too goes in search of Galpoji accompanied by the *Melagara*. Outside the city of Gokula they both see a monk and realise that he was her lover. She begs him to return to family life. Here there are two versions of the play, each performed in different parts of the region. According to one version Galpoji accepts her proposal and returns. In another they both begin to debate about each other's supremacy in terms of Siva and Sakti. Thus the play ends with the hero or heroine giving in to the other. These versions are composed by different poets and are called after their names. The first one is called *Nagesi*, the other one is called *Haradesi*. As far as I know there is no literary work that provides the idea of Radha Krishna being reborn in farmers' families as in these plays. This is an expression of the need to realise the ideal love of Radha and Krishna in their own lives.

In Saiva plays also there is a difference between literary sources and the folk stories, though they both depict the lives of the same saints. In the prelude, Siva and Parvati make their appearance. Lord Siva appears with a tigerskin wrapped around his body, and a trident in his hand, Parvati in a sari with a glittering girdle and a crownlike headgear. They both sing songs in praise of Siva accompanied by the *Melagara*. Siva requests himself to ward off all evils. After the song is over, musical instruments continue for a short time, while only Parvati dances. The *Melagara* pays homage to Siva and Parvati and requests him to overpower evil influences that may intrude during the performance. Siva gladly grants it, saying that whoever listens to the *Melagara's* story goes to heaven and those who do not listen, go to hell. Then Parvati sings and requests Siva to preach to her the importance of renunciation (*vairagya*). The chorus joins her. She does a dance number at the end in fast tempo. Then a prose dialogue ensues in which she summarises the song. Siva replies that he is not an authority on renunciation since he has married her. The only man in all his acquaintance who knows and practices renunciation is a saint living on earth. He mentions his name Parvati gets angry. She being a goddess refuses to go to a mortal being. Instead she decides to put him to the test. She calls forth a maidservant and sends her to the earth to seduce the hero. The maidservant takes birth in a prostitute's family.

The hero is a king. For some reason he gets disillusioned with life. Leaving his kingdom, he goes to a *Guru* to become a *sanyasi*. The *Guru* says: "There is a prostitute in the city. Go to her and serve her. When the blind get eyes, you can come to me." Accordingly the hero goes to the prostitute and becomes her servant. There he has to serve both the prostitute and her mother, who is blind. Her blindness is indicated by the dark glasses on the old woman's eyes. The prostitute tries all she can to seduce the hero.

The hero never gives in. Often he delivers lectures on renunciation, how the body is evil by nature and so on. The situation reaches a climax when the girl, unable to control her passion, embraces the hero. But instead of the hero she embraces a bear. The hero now touches her mother who gets back her sight immediately, Remembering the Guru's advice he goes back to him. He takes *diksa*, gets initiated, practices penance, preaches to the deserving disciples. The play ends with Siva and Parvati blessing the hero.

This is the basic structure of all Saiva plays. These stories differ greatly from the literary sources.

The Social plays are based on incidents from real life and each of them deals with a romantic theme. *Sangya Balya* is a very good example. After two or three benediction songs the story follows. Sangya, a rich man in the village falls in love with Ganga, wife of Irranna. Irranna comes to know about the illicit love affair between his wife and Sangya and kills him with the help of his brothers. The murder scene is very effective. All the three brothers rush through the audience with torches and weapons in their hands, shouting and singing; the hero stands cornered on the stage. Then all of them hold Sangya like a log of wood and begin to sing, dancing round and round. At the end a member of the chorus sprinkles red colour on Sangya's body. Then follows the court scene. They address the audience as if the audience were the judge. With their appeal to the audience the play ends. Then follows the *Mangalam*.

The Interlude

The performances sustain themselves with amorous songs and exciting dialogue. As these plays are built on social themes the make-up and costume is simple. A common characteristic of all these plays is a farce in the middle of the performance. They call it *Addasogu*, a farcial interlude. This farce is in no way connected with the main plot. Two members of the back chorus appear on the stage and begin to talk about a respectable man in the audience. Their conversation is full of symbolic meaning, mostly pornographic, which the audience enjoys immensely. They clothe their criticism in clever speech and even the victim cannot help enjoying the joke. A sample is given below:

- I Man: "Did you see Mr. So and So worshipping the anthill goddess with jasmine flowers yesterday?"
- II Man: "I do not believe you. I have seen him ploughing his own land so many times. You must know his land is very fertile."
- I Man: "Yes I know that, and that is why he is bored with his land. Actually he asked me once if there was any barren land in my street."
- II Man: "Oh, really?"

I Man: "Yes, finally he bought a barren piece in the nearby street."

II Man: "You mean that barren land? Impossible! It is too wet to be ploughed. I bet nobody on earth can plough it."

I Man: "How do you know that? Have you tried?"

II Man: Me? I hardly find time to do that."

I Man: "Why?"

I Man: "Because these days I have to watch my own land very carefully, so that other bulls may not enter it."

I Man: "Now I see why you are called a gentleman. Anyway, he bought it and there he found an ant hill. You see."

This goes on for about an hour, then the main story continues.

In contrast to the other types of plays like *Dodddata*, *Yaksagana* and puppet plays, *Sannata* brings the folk theatre to the social plane. It reflects the native intelligence, wit and sharp responses of the Indian villagers. Their awareness of economic and social problems is shown here. A very significant point is its departure from mythological themes in the right sense of the world. Krishna appears in the beginning of Vaisnava plays only to start it; the rest of the story is based on village characters. And so does Siva in Saiva plays.

Generally speaking, themes of folk theatre show an intermingling of two trends: (a) a preference for mythological stories and characters, (b) an awareness of social happenings. It seems these two trends have continued in mutual isolation at least in Kannada folk theatre. All types of plays other than the *Sannata* deal with mythological themes and superhuman personalities. *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and several other *puranas* have provided suitable themes. All the important incidents mentioned in these epics and *puranas* are enacted. They illustrate the philosophical teachings of the epics. Thus instruction with entertainment make a lasting impression on the village audience. The folk plays were as night schools for the masses, breathing the everlasting spirit of classical Sanskrit literature. Though hints are made by the jester here and there about the social conditions, these types are confined exclusively to mythological stories. Stories of saints who lived between the 7th and 19th centuries are not included as in the *Sannata*. In the *Sannata* most of the themes are based on incidents taken from real life. The stories of the saints have not only co-existed with but sometimes been pleasantly intertwined with the drama of social purpose. Romantic tales independent of religion like that of Udayana are enacted enthusiastically. Though the names of heroes, heroines, and the setting have changed with place and time their history goes back to the period of *Kathasaritsagara*, the Ocean of Story. Village performers have made liberal use of

such themes and carried them from place to place. Sometimes the same romantic tale reappears in a changed form in areas far removed from each other. These plays sang of love with moral undertones: anything immoral has to meet with punishment. So murder and death became inevitable parts. The ritual elements still persisted when gods were brought down to revive the dead. These plays have poetic songs set to charming native tunes. The presence of a leading lady on the stage as the central figure of an amorous story made this *Sannata* popular.

As pointed out earlier, from the 9th to the 16th century powerful *Bhakti* movements occurred as a moral reaction against Buddhism and the unethical outlook of petty courts as reflected in Sanskrit *Bhanas* and *Prahasanas*. Vaisnava and Saiva cults were the popular aspects of this reaction. The *Dasarata* following Visnu *Bhakti* turned to mythology not only for characters and stories but also for moral content and devotional inspiration. Saiva *dasas* took their inspiration from the contemporary saints of Tamilnadu and Karnataka. The religious leaders used these audio-visual mass media of communications freely. Thus folk drama perpetuated the cult of *Bhakti* among the common people and established it in their hearts.

Mangala

After the performance is over all the actors and members of the chorus gather on the stage and sing a *Mangala* song. Then the *Melagara*, *Dasi* and some members of the chorus go to the temple. There again they sing one or two *Mangala* songs. Then the *Melagara* puts his cymbals down on the threshold of the temple. The *dasi* removes her ankle bells and puts them down. They bow to the deity. The performance is over.

FOOT NOTES

1. Also W. T. Elmore: *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*. Lincoln, 1915.
2. H. K. Ranganath: *The Karnatak Theatre*. Dharwar, 1960 (p. 40).
3. A. L. Basham: *The Wonder that was India*. New York, 1963 (p. 305).
4. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri. *Development of religion in South India*. Madras, 1963 (p. 66).
5. *Ibid* (p. 40).

I am grateful to A. K. Ramanujan who made me see important aspects of folk theatre I had not seen before. I have used his ideas freely throughout the paper.

Chandrashekhhar Kambar returned from the U.S. to his home State of Mysore to devote himself to research in the forms of Kannada theatre and to work in the theatre movement. His production of "Jo Kumaraswamy", a contemporary play in the traditional folk-style won acclaim at the Festival of Plays held by the Akademi in 1972. He is at present doing research in the University of Bangalore, Department of Folklore Studies.